

The Tanach Series: Selections

Joel Silverstein



Dr. Bernard Heller Museum
Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion,
New York



DR. BERNARD HELLER MUSEUM

Brookdale Center
One West Fourth Street
New York, NY 10012

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Curated by Nancy Mantell, Co-Curator,
Dr. Bernard Heller Museum, Hebrew Union College- Jewish
Institute of Religion, New York.

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THE TANACH SERIES: SELECTIONS

JOEL SILVERSTEIN

Essay by Joel Silverstein and Nancy Mantell

Jewish themes and subject matter are defining topics for Joel Silverstein. *The Tanakh Series*, begun in 2017, engages with the issues of visual art, personal experience, and the Hebrew Bible. The individual works are imagined as a serial narrative, pairing at least one painting with each book. Early works in the series are created on tri-fold presentation boards and rendered in acrylic paint and collage, then mounted on wood. Later works are created directly on canvas. Each painting is listed in the order of the Jewish Publication Society edition of the Hebrew Bible.

The paintings are illuminations, rather than illustrations, of the text, aligned with traditional Midrashim and autobiography. Silverstein invents new iconographies by meditating on Western Art, especially Old Master Biblical Art, and then uses a series of visual substitutions from popular arts and culture. These include images taken from comic books, photos from cinema, especially Biblical epics, adventure, sci-fi, horror, and direct episodes of autobiography. His intention is to break into the narratives and personalize them, rendering them as both timeless and modern. The audience can then engage with the original biblical materials, see them anew, and, hopefully, turn to them with fresh interest and appreciation.



Exodus I (2021). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Exodus II (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Numbers: Bamidbar (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Deuteronomy (2021). Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 70"



Judges: Samson (2021). Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Isaiah I (2017). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Ezekiel I (2018). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Ezekiel II (2019). Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Hosea (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Joel (2021). Acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Jonah (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Lamentations (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"



Esther (2019). Acrylic and collage mounted on wood, 36" x 48"

Exodus I (2021)

Batyah (Bithiah, Thermutis), Pharaoh's daughter and a princess of Egypt, rescues the infant Moses from the Nile. Miriam, Moses' sister, aids the princess in seeking a wet nurse, the child's biological Hebrew mother. The images of Miriam and the infant Moses are derived from photos of Brighton Beach bathers on a hot summer day. They are depicted as both heroic and casual. The male figure on the right is wearing a D.C. Comics' Hawkman mask, a reference to the Egyptian god, Horus. Princess Batyah is dressed in a sleek modern gown, thrusting the narrative into a past-present world of archetypes and ahistorical time.

Exodus II (2019)

Moses is depicted as a young man wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with an image of the statue of Michelangelo's Moses (c. 1513), a vision of what he is to become. His pose breaks the fourth wall, reaching beyond the top of the painting, evoking the central figure of Paul Gauguin's mammoth work, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897). The Burning Bush depicts the ark, or Aron HaKodesh, from the Dura Europos synagogue mural (245 CE), while its fire is reminiscent of the flames of the Shoah. The painting compares the hopefulness of the young Moses with the bleak, wild, and beautiful landscape.

Numbers: Bamidbar (2017)

The word Bamidbar means "in the wilderness," as the book of Numbers describes the Children of Israel's 40-year journey to reach the Promised Land. The painting suggests a life in transition where one is lost but hopes for eventual redemption. The main figure is derived from a Fayum portrait at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (c.130-150 CE), while the background is taken from a photo of the Sinai wilderness. In employing this visual source material, the artist addresses the many distinct peoples who adopted the Exodus story and used it as part of their own traditions, here rendered within the face of the main figure.

Deuteronomy (2021)

The fifth book of the Bible is concerned with the number two. The word Deuteronomy means "Second Law" in Greek; a description of a second set of Tablets is recounted in 10:1-4; and the scene of the blessings and the curses uttered by Moses occurs between two mountains, Mt. Gerizim, and Mt. Ebal. The depiction of Moses holding the tablets of the law is the traditional cinematic one of Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), as played by Charlton Heston. The crowd of Hebrews is based on the introductory scene to *The Adventures of Superman* TV series (1951-1958). The poses of the crowd are doubled, reversed, and mirrored, reflecting the binary aspect of the text. The number two here reflects the dynamic choice between good and evil. As the crowd points up, we can almost hear, "Look up in the sky...!" The disparity between a crowd of mid-twentieth century onlookers in rumpled suits and the Biblical Moses of Hollywood lore demonstrates the timelessness of the message.

Judges: Samson (2021)

The painting is a complex image conceived in the surrealist style. The main figure is that of Victor Mature as the hero in Cecil B. DeMille's epic film *Samson and Delilah* (1949). Upon closer inspection the head does not really match the body; it is derived from a Hellenistic sculpture, the *Laocoön*. *Laocoön and his Sons* (42 BCE) portrays an episode in Virgil's *Aeneid* in which a Trojan priest and his sons are strangled by snakes. In the book of *Judges*, the hero Samson is blinded by the Philistines and led between two pillars in the Temple of Dagon for sport. With his great strength regained, he shatters the pillars, and the entire temple falls upon the crowd, killing those present. Historians have linked the story of Samson to Greek heroes within the classical tradition, including Heracles. The *Laocoön* is an artistic embodiment of dynamism, punishment, and agony. The connection is made between Mature's "heroic" expression and the blind eyes of the Laocoon behind him.

Isaiah I (2017)

This panel represents the text of *Isaiah* and the coming of the symbolic figure Immanuel. Isaiah and/or Immanuel is represented by the actor Henry Cavill as Superman. Although the figure of Immanuel has been interpreted as the foretelling of Jesus within the Christian Messianic tradition, there is no real consensus as to what it means within the Jewish tradition. He has variously been seen as a symbol of the nation and people of Israel, Isaiah himself, Isaiah's son, the King's son, or an emblematic redemptive figure. The painting describes cosmic events and stars exploding, while flowers blooming and rotting around the main figure refer to the cosmic cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

Ezekiel I (2018)

The Prophet is represented as the artist Nicolas Poussin, known for his classical draftsmanship and controlled manner. This is in direct opposition to the visions of Ezekiel, whose prophecies are among the wildest parts of the Hebrew Bible. Ezekiel's vision of the four faces of the cherubim has been subtly reimagined in the painting. Originally foretold as a man, an eagle, a lion, and an ox, describing the four realms of God's rule, the artist has rendered them as aspects of Ezekiel's personality: a lizard, representing the limbic system; a chicken, representing fear and anxiety; a tiger, for strength and aspiration, and a ram, signifying self-sacrifice.

Ezekiel II (2019)

This painting concentrates on the Valley of the Dry Bones and the raising of the dead in Chapter 37. The main figure in it is inspired by Ivan Albright's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1944), which was used in the 1945 movie adaptation of Oscar Wilde's novel. The background refers to Gustave Dore's engraving from his series of *The Bible* (1890). The tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and the murder of the Jewish people was transformed by Ezekiel into a startling vision of return. The artist's take on the narrative is that Ezekiel, confronting the raising of the dead, has taken on the physical aspects of Death itself.

Hosea (2019)

Hosea, the prophet, was commanded by God to marry the prostitute Gomer, as a way of addressing the immoral behavior of the Children of Israel. The couple had three children. The first, their son Jezreel, is pictured on the right. The main figure is derived from Byzantine mosaics, murals, and icons. The hand blessing is modified from the encoded sign of the Pantocrator, the all-powerful judge, as often seen on architectural domes. There are small, collaged elements, including frogs, fragments of figures, and a self-portrait turned backwards, all in a style suggesting the flatness of medieval religious works. Hosea preaches outward, facing the audience, while Gomer is reflective and pensive.

Joel (2021)

The artist paints himself as the prophet for whom he is named. The main theme of the text is a plague of locusts coming to punish the people of Israel. Silverstein contemplates a bust of the Incredible Hulk, a comic book antihero created as a symbol of rage by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for Marvel comics in 1962. The locusts are rubber props positioned in the artist's studio, while the action is set in a landscape modeled after Brighton Beach.

Jonah (2019)

Contrary to traditional depictions of the prophet, where Jonah is resting inside the belly of a giant whale or fish, he is painted here as living at the bottom of the ocean, being tutored by the female aspect of God, the Shechinah. The female face is derived from a floor mosaic from the 4th century CE Hammath Synagogue near Tiberius. To Jonah's left, figures taken from the *Amsterdam Haggadah* (1695) are gesticulating in judgment.

Lamentations (2019)

The painting shows the devastation after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE. Rendered as a self-portrait in a gas mask, the artist wields a machete like the serial killer, Jason Vorhees of the *Friday the 13th* movie franchise (1980-2009). The symbolic nature of the gas mask is derived from the series of etchings, *The War* (1923-24), created by the German expressionist Otto Dix as a denunciation of man's inhumanity to man. Silverstein shows the physical devastation of the site and the spiritual destruction of Judea, as well as the possibility of physical and spiritual regrowth implied in the text. The Post-Impressionist trees growing over the Temple mound ruins are a vision of both the rebirth of nature and the resurgence of the Jewish people.

Esther (2019)

The protagonist, Esther, presents herself to her husband, King Ahasuerus of Persia, in a painting by the Italian Baroque artist Artemisia Gentileschi (1630), combined with an Orientalist portrait, *The Palace Guard* (1892) by Ludwig Deutsch. Silverstein relates these events as a cinematic point-of-view shot in which the guard is observing the story.



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